

# professional learning communities: *reigniting passion and purpose*

When educators focus on why some students are not learning, rather than on pedagogy, the fundamental purpose of the education profession is revived.

Every year across America, thousands of new teachers enter the classroom full of passion and purpose, excited about making a difference in the lives of children. But as years wear on, passion and purpose are all too often replaced by complacency and cynicism.

The Capistrano Unified School District in Southern Orange County has taken a hard look at the realities of complacency and cynicism among its teachers and has found a way to rekindle that spark so they may rediscover their original passion for the profession. Top-down, politically driven educational decisions have been replaced by a pedagogy based on a new paradigm — the professional learning community.

## Symptoms of cynicism

Some teachers see themselves as pawns, subject to the whims of local, state and federal mandates. Regardless of which

political party is in power, education continues to be among the driving issues. You can count on the political party on the outside to criticize the party on the inside's educational plan and paint it as a dismal failure.

With each political swing, teachers will be told once again to get in line with the ruling pedagogy because, tragically, they've been doing it all wrong. It does not take educators long to become cynical of reform and of the officials who ride the coattails of such reform.

This cycle is common not only at the state and federal levels but at district and school sites as well. Ask veteran teachers how many superintendents or principals they have worked for, each having his or her own "vision" for the district or school. The list can often be longer than memory itself.

If this were not enough to frustrate educators, we certainly accomplish the task

by placing additional obstacles in front of them, such as inadequate funding, large class sizes, fewer support staff, onerous state testing, little planning time, facilities in need of repair, lack of technology and outdated textbooks and materials.

## Three fundamental questions

No longer can a teaching staff be asked to implement the "reform *du jour*." They must both take and be given the responsibility to determine the path that will lead to the academic success of their students. This paradigm is based on the simple cliché of going "back to basics." Rick DuFour, champion of the Professional Learning Community (DuFour, 1998) has gone back to basics by asking teachers to consider three fundamental questions:

---

*By Austin Buffum and Charles Hinman*

1. What is it that we want students to learn?

2. How will we know if students have learned it?

3. What will we do if students haven't learned?

Through seeking to answer these fundamental questions, teachers once again can feel empowered to improve student academic success and become a passion- and purpose-driven professional learning community.

In today's political climate, the answers to questions one and two are foregone conclusions. State and federal governments, with input from teachers, have identified the standards to be learned and these standards are continually assessed through a battery of tests. However, the process of teacher collaboration in addressing questions one and two is the foundation of the paradigm shift needed to truly become a professional learning community.

#### **Developing collaborative teams**

In the professional learning community, teachers begin to meet in core teams to determine which standards should be given priority, and then develop common assessments to check for understanding of those key standards.

This process is aided by the fact that the standards have already been defined by each state and/or local system. It is in the answering of question three, however, that the magic of the PLC truly takes flight.

Collaborating on why some students are not learning, rather than on pedagogy, revives the fundamental purpose of our profession. This process of collaboration allows teachers to look at longitudinal data relative to student failure at both a macro (school wide) and micro (common assessment) level and rediscover their passion to help all students learn.

In a PLC, as one researcher suggests, teachers are no longer independent contractors loosely affiliated by a parking lot, but rather are collaborative teams who share lessons and best practices. In the PLC, data-driven teacher teams look at testing diagnostics to determine areas of both success and concern.

#### **Making a long-term commitment**

In 2001, the Capistrano Unified School District made becoming a professional learning community the No. 1 district objective. The biggest challenge was to convince school site administration and their faculties that this was not just another "reform *du jour*," but a long-term commitment.

The roles were well defined: the district would support the site principal and the site principal would support the faculty. In turn, site faculty, in collaboration teams, would put in place a long-term plan that was data-driven and answered

**In a professional learning community, as one researcher suggests, teachers are no longer independent contractors loosely affiliated by a parking lot, but rather are collaborative teams who share lessons and best practices.**

the three PLC questions. The premise was — and remains — while reforms, superintendents and principals come and go, the plan designed by the faculty under the guidelines of a professional learning community will remain.

#### **A case study**

Capistrano Unified School District's San Clemente High School is a good case study for the professional learning community implementation process.

In 2001, the faculty at San Clemente High School began this process by asking the first two PLC questions. Core teams were identified and late start days were put in place to provide time for collaboration and to determine which standards students should learn (beyond the state requirements) and what assessment tools would be used to measure the standards.

During the process, the faculty committed itself to a seven-year plan and a series of longitudinal data was developed.

The longitudinal data clearly indicated San Clemente High School is an excellent academic institution.

Unfortunately, while some years were better than others, over time, little change in academic growth had taken place. This discovery prompted the faculty to reflect on the passion and purpose of being a professional learning community. Four major issues came to light:

- One-third of the student population was failing one or more classes per year.
- Freshmen were failing at a significantly higher rate.
- Little was being done to address ninth-grade transition.
- So-called middle or "average" students were being underserved.

The administration and faculty discovered that time was the biggest roadblock to having the ability to address these concerns. When could any of these issues be addressed during an already impacted school day? While passion and purpose existed, little could be done within the existing school structure.

#### **District resolve is tested**

This dilemma immediately tested the district's resolve. CUSD rose to the challenge by supporting the San Clemente High School principal and his staff in their "outside the box" solution to meeting the needs of students who were not learning. Resources and negotiations were dedicated to solve problems like busing, contracts and traditions ("but this is way we have always done it").

While many changes began to take place, the most significant was the "sacred" bell schedule. Bureaucracies were hurdled and time was set aside for consistent and structured collaboration among teachers through an increased series of late-start days.

The San Clemente High School faculty soon discovered that while late-start days were effective in answering questions one and two, they were not consistent enough to delve deeper into assessment diagnostics and share best practice.

The SCHS staff felt so strongly about the need to provide time together that 91 percent voted in favor of adding minutes to the school day to compensate for col-

## Books worth reading

### Integrating two approaches; “Making the Grade”

By George Manthey

“Understanding by Design,” developed by Grant Wiggins and Jay McTighe, has a focus on what is taught and how it is assessed. “Differentiated Instruction,” as described by Carol Ann Tomlinson, has a focus on who, where and how we teach. These two approaches, with their obvious interconnections, have recently been melded in the book “Integrating: Differentiated Instruction + Understanding by Design” by Carol Ann Tomlinson and Jay McTighe.

This book provides many suggestions for how quality classrooms can be created and sustained. They revolve around seven axioms that illustrate how “Understanding by Design” and “Differentiated Instruction” work together. Each of the axioms, as well as most every idea presented in the book, is accompanied by a real example of how it plays out in a classroom. This easy-to-read book provides a clear introduction to both these approaches and inspired me to learn more about each approach.

**Tomlinson, Carol Ann and Jay McTighe. (2006). “Integrating: Differentiated Instruction + Understanding by Design.” Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development. ISBN: 1-4166-0284-4.**

For just about a century, America has been in the process of creating “the One Best System” for public education. In “Making the Grade: Reinventing America’s Schools,” Tony Wagner suggests that a new version of the village school may be a more meaningful way to head.

Wagner argues, “The problem is not that schools are failing. Rather, the American system of education has become obsolete.” He writes, “We must make sure that all students have both the skills and values they need for work and citizenship in a rapidly changing world. We must motivate all students to want to achieve higher standards, both intellectually and morally.”

Those words hooked me, and made me anxious to learn a solution.

Rather than “learning more stuff,” which has been a result of the standards movement, Wagner suggests that education goals should be framed around “the ability to do something with what you know.” To this end, workplace skills, lifelong learning, citizenship and personal growth and health competencies are put forth as categories of what students should know and be able to do.

The example of a number of schools organized as new village schools is provided. However, the point is that the new village school will only work if it is locally created. Broad parameters are suggested for how these schools will operate.

In a time when school reform seems as if it must be channeled through the solutions determined by NCLB, “Making the Grade” provides the framework for a very different kind of reform.

**Wagner, Tony. (2003). “Making the Grade: Reinventing America’s Schools.” New York: RoutledgeFalmer. ISBN: 0-415-92762-5.**

laboration. Again, the bell schedule was altered to allow four collaboration meetings each month.

The first major finding of the collaboration teams was the fact that teacher collaboration in itself was not a natural act. Collaboration norms and a support network needed to be developed and put into place. To help facilitate this need, a collaboration and data coordinator position was developed.

Passion, purpose and trust have devel-

oped to the point at SCHS where assessment results are now given to collaboration teams by subject, by class and by teacher. The results are seen by the entire team as a tool to improve instruction, not as a means of evaluation.

“Collaboration has given us the opportunity to look beyond the isolation of our classroom to help all students achieve success. As a collaboration team, we can run diagnostics on common assessments and have the opportunity to share best

practice. If someone on our team has a greater level of success on a particular standard, they can share the lessons and strategies,” says Bob Black, collaboration team coordinator.

#### Intervention strategies

A “pyramid of success” was developed to provide a series of interventions to help and motivate students. Among these were the freshmen mentoring and mandatory tutorial programs. A major component of the pyramid is a program designed to help students understand the difference between rights and privileges.

At San Clemente High School, students have the right to attend class. However, privileges like a full lunch period (not attending mandatory tutorial), parking on campus and being issued a work permit must be earned by attending class regularly and by maintaining passing grades in every class. The faculty quickly discovered that many students found it more prudent to pass a class than to miss lunch with friends or be forced to park a mile from campus.

The most dramatic qualitative change came with the decision to separate freshmen students from the upperclassmen with the formation of the Freshman House. Based on extensive research and examination of SCHS longitudinal data, the faculty determined that freshmen should be separated from the upperclassmen whenever possible.

While there are several pillars of the program, such as academics, a four-year plan and tutorial, supervision is the central purpose. We believe that a 14-year-old should not be treated as an 18-year-old. Freshman should be supervised from the time they arrive at school to the time they leave (DuFour, 1998).

The upper class influence is limited to that of a junior or senior mentor who meets weekly with freshmen on a one-to-seven basis. Mentors attend a summer camp to become trained to help freshmen achieve academic and social success.

#### Does the PLC work?

Capistrano Unified School District does not consider the commitment to becoming a professional learning com-

munity a reform, but rather a means to reconnect with our commitment to be passion- and purpose-driven when working with children.

Does the PLC work? Consider what has happened at San Clemente High School over the past five years:

- The student failure rate of one or more “F” grades per year has declined from 33 percent in 2000 to 18 percent in 2005 for sophomore, junior and senior students.

- The student failure rate of one or more “F” grades per year has declined from 41 percent in 2000 to 20 percent in 2005 for freshman students.

- The number of students taking Advanced Placement/International Baccalaureate exams has increased by 213 percent since 2000. The pass rate remains above the national average at 71 percent.

- The class of 2006 pass rate on the California High School Exit Exam increased from 63 percent in 2001 to 93 percent in 2005.

- The number of students taking the SAT has increased 103 percent, from 185 in 2000 to 375 in 2005. The score level increased from 460 to 545 in math and from 425 to 545 in verbal.

- The number of students completing the A-G requirement has increased 38 percent from 144 to 202.

- The school’s API has increased 52 points, showing statistical growth each of the five years.

### Qualitative results

While these are the major indicators, almost all of the SCHS longitudinal data shows academic improvement. What the data does not show, however, is the qualitative results of a PLC.

“I wish I had an upperclassman mentor to show me the ropes when I was a freshman,” said senior Nic Adams. “It would have been so nice to talk with someone who had been there, done that.”

The culture has changed at San Clemente High School. Morale is high among students, staff and community. In a 2005 parent survey done in preparation for WASC, more than 95 percent of respondents felt the school was a positive environment for their children. The school

has become a model professional learning community visited by more than 50 schools throughout California. ■

### References

DuFour, R. (2004). “Are you looking out the window or in a mirror?” *Journal of Staff Development*, 25(3).

DuFour, R. & Eaker, R. (1998). *Professional learning communities at work: Best practice for enhancing student achievement*.

Bloomington, IN: National Education Service.

DuFour, R., (April 1998). “Declarations of Independence.” *The Minuteman*.

*Austin Buffum is senior deputy superintendent of the Capistrano Unified School District (abuffum@capousd.org). Charles Hinman is principal of San Clemente High School (cdhinman@capousd.org).*

## ACSA and NTC offer

# Becoming a School Leadership Coach

ACSA, in partnership with the New Teacher Center’s School Leadership Development Division, offers a variety of workshops that focus on the development of effective instructional leadership. These research-based programs are aligned with California’s Professional Standards for Educational Leaders and have a documented success rate in meeting the needs of today’s school leaders.

|                                 |  |  |                                       |
|---------------------------------|--|--|---------------------------------------|
| Coaching Leaders                | Coaching Leaders to Attain Student Success: A Training for Coaches of Site Administrators<br>3 days              | July 31–Aug. 2, 2006<br>Oct. 10–12, 2006<br>May 22–24, 2007                                      | ACSA Office<br>Burlingame, CA         |
|                                 |  | Aug. 29–31, 2006<br>March 6–8, 2007  | National University<br>Costa Mesa, CA |
|                                 | Coaching Leaders to Attain Student Success: CLASS Network of School Leadership<br>4 days                         | Cohort A (Continuing Coaches):<br>Sept. 6, 2006, Nov. 14, 2006,<br>Jan. 11, 2007, April 17, 2007 | ACSA Office<br>Burlingame, CA         |
|                                 |  | Cohort B (New Coaches):<br>Sept. 7, 2006, Nov. 15, 2006,<br>Jan. 12, 2007, April 18, 2007        |                                       |
|                                 | Coaching Leaders to Attain Student Success: CLASS Network of School Leadership<br>4 days                         | Cohort A (Continuing Coaches):<br>Sept. 27, 2006, Nov. 7, 2006,<br>Jan. 18, 2007, April 24, 2007 | National University<br>Costa Mesa, CA |
|                                 |  | Cohort B (New Coaches):<br>Sept. 28, 2006, Nov. 8, 2006,<br>Jan. 19, 2007, April 25, 2007        |                                       |
| Improving Supervision Practices | Improving Student Achievement Through Supervision for Quality Instruction of English Language Learners<br>2 days | Jan. 30–31, 2007   | ACSA Office<br>Burlingame, CA         |
|                                 |  | Oct. 26–27, 2006   | National University<br>Costa Mesa, CA |
|                                 | Improving Student Achievement Through Supervision for Best Teaching Practices<br>2 days                          | Jan. 23–24, 2007   | ACSA Office<br>Burlingame, CA         |
|                                 |  | Oct. 24–25, 2006   | National University<br>Costa Mesa, CA |

If you have any questions about the content of the workshops, please contact Betsy Warren at [bwarren@ucsc.edu](mailto:bwarren@ucsc.edu).



Ellen Moir, Executive Director  
725 Front Street, Suite 400, Santa Cruz, CA 95060  
831.459.4323 • 831.459.3822 fax  
[ntc@ucsc.edu](http://ntc@ucsc.edu) • [www.newteachercenter.org](http://www.newteachercenter.org)